When all else fails: a skills based relational academic recovery program designed for success.

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Abstract

In a tiered model of academic support, well designed tertiary level academic recovery programs are an integral part of overall student persistence strategies. Yet despite the validity of the design, the success achieved by former students, and marketing efforts, take up and retention rates for this safety net program remain low. This session will outline the structure, outcomes and recruitment efforts used in the Study Skills Plus. It will then ask participants to share their own experiences of academic recovery programs and attempt to identify recruitment and retention strategies into voluntary programs such as this, which have worked in their own institutions.

It is well documented that student persistence 'does not have a narrow focus or address only academic preparation and the achievement of academic outcomes' (David, Najor-Durack, & Dumbrigue, 2001). The issues contributing to student attrition are wide and varied, and are often only tangentially related to academic performance (Long, Ferrier, & Heagney, 2006). As the implementation of the *Review of Australian Higher Education* (Bradley, Noonan, H, & Scales, 2008) gains momentum, students from diverse educational, family and socio-economic backgrounds will increasingly form a part of our incoming student cohort (Gale, 2009). The changing student population will mean that it will become more and more important to provide a holistic approach to student support which takes account of varying life circumstances and how these impact on academic outcomes. This paper will elaborate on an extracurricular academic recovery program, specifically designed to bring students back from the brink of exclusion.

Research suggests that student attrition is a highly complex issue which cannot be addressed by a single 'one size fits all' approach (Tinto, 2006-2007). Furthermore, student support can be defined broadly as 'all activities beyond the production and delivery of course materials that assist in the progress of students in their studies' (Simpson, 2002, p. 6) Hence, as part of the provision of student support programs for increasingly diverse student populations, tiered models of support such as those suggested by Wilson (2009) become even more important (Wilson, 2009). In the tiered model, which is aptly depicted diagrammatically, as a triangle, has the most emphasis on primary level things we do for all students. This is progressively decreased through the selective primary level, or things we do for targeted groups, to the secondary level which caters to students who are identified as at risk, and finally to the tertiary level, which is what we do for students who are failing (Wilson, 2009). While the least support effort is, and should be placed on tertiary level interventions, they are nonetheless a crucial aspect to supporting student transition into university level education.

James et.al., (2010) point out that:

> there is perhaps no greater challenge facing the sector than that of identifying and monitoring the students who are 'at risk' of poor attrition or poor academic progress. Limited inroads have been

made into this problem. However, the targets for expansion and equity are likely to lead to an enhanced focus on 'at risk' students. In some ways, first year retention is a proxy for the appropriateness of the matching of students to courses during recruitment and selection, for the relevance of courses, for the quality of teaching, for the quality of support and so on. (James, Krause, & Jennings, 2010, p. 6)

In an attempt to address at least some of the above issues *Study Skills Plus* was designed as a top tier intervention which is specifically designed for students who have been placed on academic probation after the first semester of their first year of study, that is, those who have been identified as significantly 'at risk'. The idea draws some impetus for the idea of monitored probationary programs put forward by Mann et al. (Mann, Hunt, & Alford, 2003-2004) It is a series of carefully designed and scaffolded group consultations which include diagnostic testing, as well as self and peer assessment and low stakes formative assessment (Taras, 2010). The program is voluntary and extracurricular so all 'assessments' are solely to enhance learning.

While one of the primary aims is to improve academic performance, although a key component is skills development, the program also draws heavily on Wilson's concept of 'education with heart' and incorporates the broadest definition of student support referred to above (James, et al., 2010; Wilson, 2011). It also refers significantly Stella Cottrell's personal development agenda (Cottrell, 2010) and Neal Raisman's principles of service which he suggests can raise student retention by up to 70% (Raisman, 2008). The particular principles of Raisman's work which have been taken up in designing and delivering *Study Skills Plus* are:

- All members…must be given courteous, concerned and prompt attention to their needs and values.
- Students come before personal or college-focussed goals. Students really are more important than you or I.
- Students can never be an inconvenience.
- The goal is not to recruit the very best students, but to make the students we recruit their very best.
- To every problem there is more than one solution, and that may be external rather than in academia. (2008).

As Wilson has mentioned on numerous occasions, good teaching is relational (Wilson & Lizzio, 2011), and that the relationships we build with our students are 'gold' (Wilson, 2011). *Study Skills Plus* consequently has both an academic and relational focus which combines with a customer service and administrative support (Muller & Nulty, 2011) hence the 'Plus' in the name. As well as learning how to manage their time and write essays students are given advice on how to manage stress and ways to build their resilience and self efficacy.

The *Study Skills Plus* program was piloted in first semester 2010 and has undergone several permutations since then. Some of the changes are:

- more skills have been included
- workshops have moved from fortnightly to weekly
- more attention has been given to personal development

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The program has enjoyed varying degrees of success in achieving the desired outcomes of increased grade point averages (GPAs), increased student retention and student satisfaction. Student satisfaction has continued to achieve the most positive results in terms of outcomes and in the pilot semester, those students who participated in at least half of the program increased their GPA by a full point, with some going from a .5 to a 4 (but they were rare).

A need for programs such as *Study Skills Plus* after the first semester of first year of higher education have an important role to play in monitoring 'at risk' students as well as assisting students to transition into success and while we make every effort to ensure that students are adequately prepared and orientated into tertiary study, there will continue to be a need for tertiary level interventions which help to brink students back from the brink of exclusion.

The primary concerns with the program in terms of its effectiveness are recruiting students into it and keeping them in the program until the end. At this stage the program has a take up rate of approximately ten percent of students who have been placed on academic probation. It is an extracurricular activity for which enrolment is entirely voluntary. As there are no formal assessments in the program and it does not bear any credit towards students' degrees, it will often be the first thing to go, when the going gets tough.

Session outline

The first fifteen minutes of this session will be a presentation on the structure, outcomes and recruitment strategies used to attract students to the program.

Then the room will be divided into groups which will be asked to consider one of the following three questions for ten minutes:

1. Do you have similar programs at your institution? What outcomes do they achieve?
2. How can we improve our recruitment strategies? What is the best way to market the relational aspect of the program?
3. What is the best way, other than introducing assessment tasks to retain students in the program until the end?

The final five minutes of the session will be open discussion and feedback from the group.

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